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Many Inventions Behind the Footlights

The Reviewing Stand

By ALEXANDER WOOLLCOTT.

IN such a week as the one just past, a dramatic critic is rather like the poor little chameleon who was placed on a Scotch plaid and died trying to make good. Here was the heir apparent of the American theater claiming his inheritance by making his first appearance as *Hamlet*. Here was the fairly dazzling Cecile Sorel, on the loose from the severe confines of her home theater, the *Comédie Française* and pausing on her way home to rattle a few skeletons from the closet of that mossy institution. Here was a new play by Milne and a new playwright sponsored by the Equity. Here were the young folks—Margalo Gillmore, Glenn Hunter and Sidney Blackmer—doing themselves rather proud in sundry rôles intrusted to them. Quite a lively week! The succeeding Sunday is no time for idle vaporizings on the use of beaverboards in the theater at Dusseldorf or the use of the indefinite article in the plays of Synge. Rather it is time for the scout to throw himself down on the greensward and pant out a hurried word or two on each of the new things as (and if) he saw them.

JOHN BARRYMORE'S "HAMLET" was given Thursday night before an audience that cheered with a heartfelt satisfaction—a satisfaction in finding this most richly endowed of our players back on the road again, a satisfaction in the truest, realest *Hamlet* which the New York of this day has seen. Barrymore's Dane is masculine, princely, whimsical and when he lies there at *Horatio's* feet, little and slim and dead, you wince at the pang of a good fellow forfeited, a gay, charming, immensely likable person thwarted by a most cursed spite. It is the pang you must feel if "Hamlet" has been allowed to say its say again in the theater. It has this time, and under Hopkins's direction, it emerges clearer and fresher and more a-tingle with its own endless and abundant life than we have ever had the good fortune to find it. The night that Barrymore played "Justice" on the same stage, six years before, it was written in his skies that he must sooner or later attempt the rôle which stands ahead of all the young folk of the theater as Skull and Bones is in the thoughts of every freshman who enters Yale. In a brilliant and vastly entertaining book called "The Second Empire," that acid historian, Philip Guedalla, refers casually to the little Prince of Rome, the sickly Napoleon II., as "the dim figure of a pale young man whom the imagination of a poet and the genius of a great actress have conspired to present to posterity as a stoutish woman in a white uniform with a queer, haunting voice." A similar conspiracy has beset many latter-day theatergoers with the notion that Hamlet was a withered fellow though surprisingly supple and well preserved and one given to recitations when alone. Something a little nearer the sweet prince as he was first imagined emerges vivid and satisfying from the revival of the play at the Sam H. Harris Theater. Back to it we are minded to go on all our spare evenings and of its sundry facets we shall try to make fuller report on another Sunday.

MERTON OF THE MOVIES is a skillful and unexpectedly tender comedy which Kaufman and Connelly have contrived from the much applauded story by Harry Leon Wilson—the story of the gawky, naive and befuddled innocent from a small town grocery store who makes the pilgrimage to Hollywood to become a movie star. It is an amusing story, padded with educational travelogues on motion pictures and how they are made. We speak thus churlishly of Mr. Wilson's tale because the merest suggestion that "Merton" is his best work seems to us an ungrateful impertinence—ungrateful and impertinent to that gentle, beautifully intuitive and exquisitely wrought comedy, "Bunker Bean." When the numberless zanies of our acquaintance cheered incontinently for "Ruggles of Red Gap" and later for "Merton of the Movies," vowing they had never read such delightful books in all their days, we seemed to hear a little voice on the shelf asking half quizzically, half sadly: "Are we so soon forgot?" The subject is an especially sensitive one with us at the moment. Our bookseller, in his bored, chill way, has just sent word that "Bunker Bean" is out of print. This notice induced a mild fury. We shall spend the rest of the year in the secondhand bookstores. "Bunker Bean" as a play was slaughtered by an outrageous performance in the title rôle. It was rumored at the time that the hardy comedian who undertook the rôle had not gone so far as to read the book. Just now we can imagine nothing of less consequence, for it is our dying wish that that play, or some adaptation of the same story, be revived as soon as possible with Glenn Hunter as the ineffable Bunker—Glenn Hunter who, by a performance that is one part skill, one part perfect compatibility and one part charm, endows "Merton of the Movies" with a heart-warming likability and an authentic pathos which make that play a true delight. We seem to recall that the arrival of Hunter on Broadway, long before his first little triumph in "Clarence," was embarrassingly like Merton's own guileless, wide-eyed assault on Hollywood. Was it not this same Glenn Hunter who ran away from his home up in Highland Falls in the Catskills and dwelt on one of our more comfortable park benches until the Washington Square Players, who rather preferred actors of that peculiar training, picked him up and started him off in "The Clod"?

BEN AMI
who is coming to the Selwyn Theater shortly before Christmas in an adaptation of a Berlin success which will be called "Johannes Kreisler."

THE LOVE CHILD is a rouged and heavily pencilled bit of theatrical claptrap that Martin Brown has constructed on the foundations of the French play called "L'Enfant de l'Amour," which the late Henri Bataille wrote as a characteristic specimen and expression of an almost sterile theater. It was acted in Paris by Réjane about eleven years ago. The play as it reaches us brings considerable relish and not a grain of humor to the contemplation of the woes of a woman with a cooling lover and a carefully concealed backstairs son, who *will* persist in growing up. It is played for us with an expensive cast and remains entirely incredible throughout, thanks partly to a curious sentimentalizing of its story and partly to a half hearted, translucent pretense on the part of the author that it is all happening in New York instead of Paris. It is waste breath to prattle away about the acting in so baldly theatrical a piece as this. For instance it would be foolish to shake a critical head over the incurably forensic stage manner of Lee Baker, who invariably behaves like the magnate in one of those money worshiping American short stories. He seems to be always on the verge of taking his stand behind a costly mahogany desk, placing one hand carefully in his pocket and giving out an interview on the rules of conduct in the school of hard knocks to which he owes his success. Yet why berate a serene basso-profundo actor like Baker for not seeming limber and untheatrical and human in a play wherein, at the big, not to say bouncing, moment, he must needs snarl as follows: "Faugh! You're but a common cad with the taint of seduction in your veins!" Faugh, indeed! It is Sidney Blackmer (as the common cad with a taint of seduction in his veins) who, among the three central players of the company, gives the one simple, genuinely felt and really satisfying performance. Despite a somewhat owlish manner, a decidedly viscous speech and an evidently depressing fear that some one will think him stagey, he plays truly and tenderly. This young Southerner was raved about last season as if he were a new Barrymore and advertised as if he were a new face cream. He seems, however, to have decided to go on quietly and just be a good actor. It ought, perhaps, to be reported that "The Love Child," when glimpsed at its first Wednesday matinee, had all the aroma of a coarse grained popular success. It was evidently enjoyed by a large audience of women who often paused in their pleasant chatter about (and during) the play to drop a tear or two over the predicament of this beautiful lady who, after seventeen years, seemed in peril of losing the man who had kept her all that time and over the noble audacity of her son in his attitude toward her lover who had, incidentally, supported him too.

THE THIRTY-NINTH STREET THEATER has acquired a lot of unaccustomed fifth acts, a hooded prompter's box down at the center of the footlights and an overwhelming patronage from the social register. Cecile Sorel of the *Comédie Française*, abetted by a pretty good company that includes one splendidly spirited and adroit actor in Albert Lambert, is in the midst of a fortnight's engagement here on her way back home from Canada to Paris. Ablaze with jewels and eye smiting with a hundred wondrous gowns, this artful and undeniably interesting actress of a type that is passing has been airing here a selection from the repertory of a once powerful institution. Old threadbare plays by Augier and the younger Dumas, interspersed with Molière and Shakespeare—that has been the type of entertainment. It is difficult to hit at a nice analogy but you would come somewhere near it if you were to picture our own Marlowe and Sothern taking two weeks from their rest year abroad to go to Paris and, at the *Théâtre Edouard VII*, say, giving a season of such pieces as "Twelfth Night" and "The Taming of the Shrew" with frequent relapses to Boker's "Francesca da Rimini" and the trusty old "Richelieu," which only Mantell has ventured to play in this town in our time.

HOSPITALITY, offered as the second production of the Equity Players, is the kind of first play that makes you want to see the author's next. There are a hundred and one deft touches and scraps of true talk in this tragi-comedy of a glum, hard worked old woman who adores her two children but has been so battered by the world that she has lost the art of saying so and can only snap at them. Your sympathies become hoplessly involved in the sullen grief of the old crosspatch, this horny handed crosspatch who runs a boarding house near the factory, sends her son off to college and then never writes him because she cannot bear to have him see her illiterate letters. As played by the incomparable Louise Closser Hale, the role takes on a certain granular austerity, with an occasional witch note in it, too. Yet she keeps the tragedy humble and among the things we shall not soon forget is the sight of that packhorse of a woman sinking guiltily into a chair for a moment and curling her tired, tired, tired feet. Leon Cunningham, the author, is a Michigan man of the class of '16, who has since done a bit of reporting, a bit of bond selling and a good deal of miscellaneous acting. He was with Mary Ryan in "Only 38," for instance. In "Hospitality" he has written a play that suffers considerably from being badly proportioned and badly paced and that is sometimes weakly violent in its—well, there's no other word for it, though it does suggest the horrid lingo of a correspondence course in playwriting—its "motivation."

THE ROMANTIC AGE is fine spun Milne, a prankful, gay defense of romantic possibilities that are, after all, involved in the prospect of eating breakfast together forever and ever and ever. It is a delicate, featherweight comedy that is never allowed to touch the ground—thanks to a delightful performance by such players as Leslie Howard, J. M. Kerrigan and Margalo Gillmore. Of the three, it is our notion that it is Miss Gillmore who helps most. And then, at the Liberty, you will find "Little Nellie Kelly," Cohan's new musical show which they say is a good specimen of its kind.

James Kirkwood, who plays the exacting title role in "The Fool."

Addenda

Attention is hereby called to the following communication:

Am I the only person to protest against a feature of the Forty-niners Show which strikes at the very roots of our clean American business life? I refer to the second number "Life in the Back Pages." Has no one but myself seen the pernicious propaganda in this? Or am I too subtle in reading into the skit a satire upon our advertisements? We laugh, Mr. Woollcott—by which I mean not you and I, though of course we do often laugh; nor yet do I use the phrase in its editorial sense as you do so often and so well; by "we" in this case I mean simply the audience, who (which) as I say laughs; but do they come away with their faith unshaken? I am afraid not. Let us consider, then, for a moment what would result if the public generally lost faith in advertising. Magazines would cease, and what would we (us) writers do then? Newspapers—and this may touch you—could not be printed, or at least could no longer pay large salaries; and, most unfortunate, perhaps, of all, the solid business man who has been turning his excess profits back into advertising would then be forced to pay his full income tax. And one other point—a minor one, however. When a young gentleman, whose face, coloring and hair alike suggest a Certain Collar, appears only in his underwear, there must be a sense of disappointment—of, as it were, anticlimax. Not that underwear in its proper place is not an excellent thing.

ALICE DUER MILLER.

Answers to the above questions. (1, 2, 3, 4) Yes. (5) What, indeed?

* * *

Our occasional suggestion that the best way to go on the stage is to select a fairly competent actress as one's grandmother has elicited defiance from so remote a spot as Oxford, whence a girl sends this proclamation: "Well, it must begin, and why not with me as the grandmother?"

* * *

Joe Cook playing at the Palace this week. Here is one of the most engaging comedians of our day. He is becoming a cult. The editor of "*The Dial*" has been telling the tale of him for many months and the office boy of this department has been to see him seven times. Laggard and skeptical, we dropped in at the Colonial recently to look the fellow over. Now we, too, are a member of the cult and as soon as enough time has elapsed to blur the dates a little, it is our present intention to give out the impression that we founded it.

The Talk of Broadway

By FRANK VREELAND

THERE is a possibility that Fritz Leiber, one of Shakespeare's most ardent supporters, will appear in the leading role of "The Fountain," and it is likely in any event that Eugene O'Neill's new opus will come upon New York after all. O'Neill wrote the play directly for the Arthur Hopkins customers, it will be remembered, and the manager handed over to Lionel Barrymore the leading part—that of Ponce de Leon, the well known precursor of Burton Holmes and E. M. Newman. However, for reasons which have not been made known, but which are understood to cast no reflections on the quality of the play, Barrymore decided to go hunting motion picture locations instead of the fountain of youth.

Since then Hopkins has been talking over the part with McKay Morris, now saying harsh things opposite Ethel Barrymore in "Ross Bernd." But Morris is tied up in the plans for Miss Barrymore's season, particularly with the role of *Orlando* in "As You Like It," so his performance of "The Fountain" hardly seems likely to get beyond the conversational stage. But the producer has taken to discussing it with Leiber, and there—well, just watch, wait and pray.

William A. Brady has become so uplifted as a result of his production of "The World We Live In" that he aims to go in for artistic productions hereafter with typical Brady vim, leaving the melodramatic field to struggle along without his potent aid as in the past. He aims to exploit the future works of the Capek brothers, though not insisting that they shall turn out only insect comedies.

Brady has contracted for the next three plays by Josef and Karel, with an option on the three to follow, by which time, it is expected, the manager's appetite will be satisfied. Their latest play since the entomological excursion is already wound up and running in Prague. It may be seen here next March—and then again, you never can tell. While Josef is primarily a futuristic painter, he has decided to throw in his lot with his brother and give the benefit of his services to the drama, so that the pair will collaborate in all future hair raising. Whether the brothers Capek will visit the United States during the course of their future raids on the box office is uncertain. One of them has been here already, having been attached to the Czech-Slovak mission here, so that prior to the opening of "R. U. R." several persons knew how to pronounce his name without taking a course in it.

"The World We Live In," by the bye, has taken a decided turn for the better in patronage lately. A week ago yesterday it did between $2,500 and $2,800 in receipts, which, considering the general level of business, is quite robust for a Saturday night's pickings. Early in the run the management sent 500 tickets to Columbia University students, but the production now seems to have pulled out of the undergraduate class.

Ring Lardner has been a busier man as a playwright recently than the public supposes, having written enough plays to outfit several Ziegfeld "Follies" for both the summer and winter trade. Morris Gest has been quietly receiving a bombardment of Lardner plays and just as quietly burying them or turning them out to pasture elsewhere. This is in pursuance of a three year contract, ending next March, which he made with Lardner, whereby the facetious one was to come to the surface with one play a year.

The humorist received $3,000 advance royalties as Gest's investment in the regularity of his humor. Sure enough, he turned up with the first play on time. It was a piece called "The Drought," and it dealt with the subject lying nearest every one's heart on Broadway. However, it didn't get very close to the manager's, for he rejected it.

The second year Lardner again came to the mark with a play, "Going South," a comedy which put Palm Beach in its place. Gest sighed and set this to one side. The contract stipulated that Lardner, after giving Gest first call on his literary by-products and allowing the manager one month in which to make the great decision on them, could trundle his plays to other managers. So he got Gene Buck to elaborate "Going South," and now Buck says—but not on a stack of Bibles—that he is going to become a producing manager himself with this piece and see that the public gets all that's coming to it.

Lardner is due to have his third and last play mature under Gest's eyes before next March. Meanwhile he has been busy writing for Florenz Ziegfeld, Jr., turning out not only the Fanny Brice opus, but also developing humor offhand for a piece for Mary Eaton. The dainty miss of the "Follies," who leaped so airily into "Sally" during Marilyn Miller's absence, will be starred in this play in her own right if the public can only possess their souls in patience for a couple of months. Lardner asked Gest if these extra curriculum activities met with his approval, and the impresario of the "Chauve Souris" paused only long enough to take off his velvet hat with a sweeping gesture and give his benediction.

In passing it might be noted that Balieff's troupe is said to have rolled up close to $300,000 so far, and see more money in sight.

It could have been foreseen, but Brock Pemberton couldn't very well have prevented it. He has received the manuscript of a play entitled "The Hall-Mills Case." The aspiring author appended this footnote: "This is not the famous New Jersey murder." Doubtless the person who submitted it figured that this would go up in the electric sign along with the title.

Pemberton hasn't yet figured out why he was thus signally honored. It is expected that if he ever produces it he will call it, "Six Prosecutors in Search of a Clew."

Daniel Kusell, who produced "The Gingham Girl" at the Earl Carroll Theater in association with Lawrence Schwab, has himself taken a fling at this playwriting business, and now Mike Goldreyer is expected to give birth to a tragic drama of seven acts in blank verse. It is a comedy that Kusell has fomented. It will be the next production of this firm, as they decided it would be unwise to strain their luck by presenting another musical comedy immediately. Musical comedy is often like lightning—it rarely hits twice in the same place. This new play will be unwrapped around the first of the year, about the time that a second "Gingham Girl" company bustles off to Chicago.

E. Ray Goetz last week sold his holdings in "The Hayseed," the musical comedy by A. E. Thomas and Brian Hooker, with music by George Gershwin and William Daly, to Davidow and Le Maire, vaudeville entrepreneurs, who put it in drydock for a short overhauling. It will be given a trial spin at Stamford to-morrow. The case remains the same, comprising Mr. and Mrs. Barry—out of variety at last—Olin Howland and Emma Haig, who is said to have recovered completely from the injury which retired her from the first "Music Box Revue."

For their new play, "At the End of the World," which underwent the acid test at Stamford on Friday, the Shuberts are trying an unusual method of stimulating the principals. The four leading players, who are Alexandra Carlisle, Vincent Serrano, William Morris and Alphonz Ethier, are reported to have been offered, instead of a flat salary, 6 per cent of the gross weekly. As these players have been getting between $500 and $800 weekly they accepted, estimating that if the play reached only the moderate figure of $10,000 gross weekly they stood to win $600 apiece—as any one can readily see. On the other hand, if the play slumps to $2,000 a week—but let's not talk about gruesome subjects.

While stars receive percentages, sometimes quite large, it is very rare that the principals get a similar endowment. The total in this case is 24 per cent.—count up for yourself—and outside of strictly cooperative ventures, this is probably the biggest slice cut off a theatrical melon in recent years by a group of the *dramatis personæ*. Moreover, having an interest in the show insures them against being fired—though they all have run of the play contracts already to make that certain.

Our note last week complaining about our ignorance of Lillian Barrett, authoress of "Paddy," Mrs. Fiske's forthcoming vehicle, brought the following rush of information to our aid:

She has written stories for the *Smart Set* and the *Century*, and at present has a serial running in the latter magazine. She has written several novels, including "Sinister Revele" and "Gibbeted Gods," and is working on a new one.

All of which ought to convince us that we have much to learn—but somehow it doesn't.

The tour of Mme. Kousnezoff and the "Revue Russe" was scheduled to close last night in Baltimore. About a dozen more weeks remain, for which they are under contract with the Shuberts. One report had it that an effort was made to induce them to cancel the rest of their contract, but that the troupe stood upon their natural Russian right to rebel at this. It was

Jeanne Eagels, who has been starred because of her triumph in "Rain."